

ANGULAR ORIENTATION CONTROL SYSTEM FOR FRICTION WELDING

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

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The present invention relates generally to a control system for use on friction welding machines for controlling the final angular orientation of two workpieces relative to each other that have been welded together using the friction welding process.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Friction welding machines are generally well known in the art. In a friction weld, heat is generated by rubbing two workpieces together until the material at the interface between the two pieces reaches a plastic state. The two workpieces are then forged together under pressure to finalize the weld and expel gases, thus forming a single component having an integral bond. A friction weld can typically be formed in a very short period of time compared to more conventional welding methods, and thus friction welds are less labor intensive, more uniform and more cost effective than conventional methods. Friction welders are especially well suited for welding round bars or tubes to each other, or for welding round workpieces to flat plates, disks or gears. The friction welding process is frequently used to produce automotive drive shafts, automotive air bag canisters, gear shafts and engine valves, as well as other applications in which a high quality weld is required.

On a friction welder, one of the workpieces is mounted to a rotating chuck assembly while the other workpiece is fixed in a stationary chuck or tailstock. A drive motor accelerates the rotating chuck to a predetermined speed, and the parts are then forced together with the friction induced heat producing a material flux. The pieces are then forged together under pressure, which expels gas and produces a fine grain weld.

Friction welders are generally divided into two categories, inertia friction welders and the more conventional direct drive friction welders. The rotating chuck on inertia friction welders is drivingly connected to a flywheel. A drive motor accelerates the flywheel to speed, the drive motor is then disconnected, and the kinetic energy stored in the flywheel is converted to heat energy as the two workpieces are forced together under extremely high pressure. The rotating chuck rapidly decelerates to a stop and the weld is formed at the interface between the two workpieces. Inertia friction welding has a number of inherent drawbacks which makes it unsuitable for many applications. First, the flywheel bearings gradually heat up, which depletes the available kinetic

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a schematic illustration of a friction welding control system incorporating the teachings of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is an elevational view of a friction welding machine having the control system of the present invention installed thereon;

FIG. 3 is a flow chart of the main control program used to control the system illustrated in FIGS. 1 and 2;

FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram of the amplifier circuit of the control loop shown in FIG. 1, which generates continuous feedback regarding the actual speed and position of the rotating spindle;

FIG. 5 is a spindle profile curve in graphic form which indicates the desired spindle speed as a function of time during the entire weld process;

FIG. 6 is a tabular representation of the input register, which contains the desired weld parameters and the material variables input by the operator for processing by the host computer; and

FIG. 7 is a tabular representation of the output register, which represents each of the program parameters calculated by the host computer.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The embodiment herein described is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise form disclosed. It is chosen and described to explain the principles of the invention and its application and practical use to best enable others skilled in the art to follow its teachings.

Referring now to the drawings, a control system for a friction welder according to the present invention is generally indicated by the reference numeral 10. Control system 10 is operatively connected to and controls the operation of a friction welding device 12. Friction welder 12 includes a rotating spindle 14, having a chuck assembly 16 for securing a first workpiece 18, and a non-rotating chuck assembly or tailstock 20 for holding a second workpiece 22. Typically, tailstock 20 is slidably mounted to a track or slide 24. An actuator 25 enables tailstock 20 holding second workpiece 22 to move towards spindle 14 holding first workpiece 18 in a direction parallel to the axis 27 of rotating spindle 14, thus enabling first and second workpiece's 18, 22 to be brought into contact with each other.

As shown in FIGS. 1 and 4, control system 10 includes a central or host computer 26 which is operatively connected to a motion controller 28 which in turn is operatively connected to a power amplifier 30, a drive motor 32 which includes a tachometer 34, and position sensor 36. Motion controller 28, power amplifier 30, motor 32, tachometer 34, and position sensor 36 together form a control loop 40. Drive motor 32 is preferably a variable speed drive motor commonly employed in the art, and tachometer 34 and position sensor 36 are likewise commonly employed in the art. Preferably, position sensor 36 is calibrated to measure the angular position of the spindle as it rotates about its axis in increments of a rotation, and position sensor converts the detected position to an actual position command 37. Position sensor 36 also tracks the actual number of rotations during each of the weld phases, such as the actual acceleration, pre-heat, heat and forge rotations 46A, 48A, 49A and 51 (see FIG. 1), respectively, as discussed below. Preferably, each complete rotation of the spindle can be broken into a thousand discrete angular positions. Based on a number of

energy because energy is lost through increased friction. Second, due to the very high forge pressure required, inertia welding is unsuitable for thin walled tubes and many soft metals, such as aluminum. In general, the quality and uniformity of inertia friction welds are hard to control.

On direct drive friction welders, the drive motor used to rotate one of the workpieces remains engaged until the weld is complete and the rotating workpiece comes to a halt. Unfortunately, the final orientation of the rotating workpiece relative to the stationary workpiece is not easily controlled. In many applications, it is critical that the two workpieces be welded together in a predetermined angular orientation relative to one another. For example, the yoke at one end of an automotive drive shaft must be perpendicular to the yoke at the other end of the drive shaft; otherwise, the drive line components will be prone to premature failure. Similarly, on many gear shafts and other components the gear at one end of the shaft must be precisely located relative to another gear or cam lobe on the shaft.

In order to achieve precise angular orientation a number of approaches have been attempted. For example, one prior art approach uses a defined braking mechanism which applies a braking force as the rotating spindle decelerates and approaches the desired final orientation which in turn is conveyed to the rotating spindle via an electronic signal or mark. Usually however, due to variations in the braking mechanism and other variables, the deceleration of the spindle is not uniform. Frequently, the brake must be released and the drive motor must be temporarily re-engaged in order to force the spindle to the desired location. Thus the rate of deceleration, as well as the final angular position of the rotating workpiece, is relatively uncontrolled. In many instances as the spindle approaches the desired stopping point, it becomes clear that the spindle has or will stop short of the desired alignment mark, while at other times the spindle will completely pass the mark. If the spindle stops short, the drive motor is re-engaged and the spindle is accelerated and driven to the mark. If the spindle overshoots the mark, the drive motor is re-engaged and the spindle is turned an extra rotation in order to reach the mark again. Unfortunately, in each instance the spindle has slowed significantly and the weld has already begun to cool and the material has begun to harden. Any subsequent accelerations and rotations of the spindle cause microfractures in the crystal structure of the material, resulting in a lower quality, high risk weld. Furthermore, the defined braking method is not accurate enough for many applications. In general, the defined braking method is unsuitable for applications in which the final angular orientation is critical and is also unsuitable for many aluminum welds, aircraft quality welds, air bag welds and other safety related welds.

Accordingly, there exists a need for a control system for friction welders that can control the final orientation of one workpiece relative to the other, and that consistently produces a uniform high quality weld suitable for use on aircraft and safety related applications and on a wide variety of material types.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The control system according to the present invention allows two workpieces to be welded together at a desired angular orientation. The control system of the present invention allows two pieces to be welded together with greater precision and accuracy than is possible with any of the prior art control methods. The control system constantly monitors the angular orientation of the spindle at any given point in

time, and compares the present spindle orientation with a predetermined desired spindle orientation that has been calculated by a host computer. The computer calculates the desired orientation of the rotating spindle at any given moment during the weld process, including during the acceleration phase, the burn-off and weld phases, and through the deceleration phase until the spindle stops at the predetermined desired final angular orientation. The programmable host computer determines and calculates all of the critical weld parameters, depending on the material properties, weld characteristics, thickness, and rotating mass of the pieces to be welded together. Based upon this information, the computer generates a desired spindle profile curve which becomes a reference point for the desired speed and the desired angular position of the rotating spindle at every point during the weld process. Using the profile curve, a motion controller connected to and controlled by the central computer constantly compares the actual spindle orientation to the desired spindle orientation throughout the process, and makes the necessary corrections to ensure that the actual orientation conforms to the desired orientation.

A motion controller is operatively connected to the host computer, and generates a motion command or speed signal, which is communicated to a drive motor that drives the spindle. A position sensor is connected to the rotatable spindle, and a tachometer is connected to the drive motor. The position sensor and the drive motor communicate constant feedback to the motion controller regarding the present position of the rotatable spindle and the present speed of the drive motor. The present orientation is compared to the desired orientation for that particular moment in the weld cycle, and the motion controller constantly makes adjustments to the spindle speed, either by increasing or decreasing the speed, in order to conform the actual spindle orientation to the desired spindle orientation.

The control system employs a proportional-integral-derivative controller ("PID controller"), which enables the control system to respond very quickly to differences between the actual and the desired spindle orientation. The control system can thus respond very quickly to increases or decreases in friction between the two workpieces as the materials heat up and as the weld is being formed. At any given moment, parameters indicative of the present spindle orientation and the present spindle speed are sent to the motion controller, which compares the actual orientation to the desired orientation. The motion controller then makes any necessary corrections and varies the speed of the drive motor accordingly. Thus, by making the system more responsive, the angular orientation of the rotatable spindle at any given moment can be precisely controlled as can the rotational speed of the spindle. Each of these variables are constantly measured and compared to target values calculated and communicated by the host computer to the PID controller.

Accordingly, it is an object of this invention to provide an improved control system for friction welders.

It is another object of this invention to provide a control system for friction welders that allows two workpieces to be welded together in a precise angular orientation.

A further object of this invention is to provide a control system for friction welders that enables two workpieces to be welded together with much more precision than is possible in known existing friction welding methods.

These and other objects of the invention will become readily apparent to those skilled in the art upon a reading of the following description.

material variables input by the operator, such as the material weight, dimensions, and thickness of workpieces 18 and 22, host computer 26 generates a desired spindle profile 120 (shown in FIG. 5) which represents the desired rotational speed 53 of spindle 14 at any moment during the weld cycle. The desired final angular position 42 (see FIG. 6) of the first workpiece 18 relative to the second workpiece 22 about their common rotating axes is input into the computer via input register 38 and is communicated to motion controller 28. The operator inputs the material variables mentioned above into the host computer 26, which then calculates the desired total number of spindle rotations 44 (see FIG. 7) required between the actual starting position and the desired final position 42. The total number of desired rotations 44 includes the desired acceleration rotations 46, the desired pre-heat rotations 48, the desired heat rotations 49, and the desired forge rotations 50.

Tachometer 34 generates a signal which indicates the actual speed 35 (see FIG. 4) of the drive motor, while position sensor 36 (see FIG. 1) generates a signal which indicates the actual angular position 37 of the spindle 14. Based on the desired final position 42 and the actual position 37, motion controller 28 generates a motion command or speed signal 54 which is communicated to power amplifier circuit 30 and then to drive motor 32. Thus, a control loop 40 is formed which continuously generates feedback regarding the actual speed 35 and the actual position 37 of rotating spindle 14, which matches the actual speed and position of the first workpiece 18 held by chuck assembly 16. Ideally, actual speed 35 closely approximates desired speed 53 (see FIG. 7), while actual position 37 closely approximates the desired position 39. The desired position 39, which is generated by host computer 26 as explained below, represents the desired angular position of spindle 14 relative to its axis of rotation at any particular point in time during the weld cycle. Any differences between actual speed and/or position and desired speed and/or position are corrected by control loop 40 as discussed in greater detail below.

Referring now to FIG. 4, amplifier circuit 30 includes summation node or junction 58 which sums the difference between the speed signal 54 and the actual speed 35. Junction 58 generates a difference signal 59, which is communicated to velocity amplifier 60, which in turn generates a current command signal 62. Current command signal 62 is communicated to summation node or junction 64, which sums the difference between current command signal 62 and current feedback signal 66 from motor 32. Junction 64 generates a difference signal 65, which is communicated to amplifier 68, which is connected to drive motor 32.

FIG. 3 shows a flow chart of the weld cycle, while FIGS. 6 and 7 illustrate input register 38 and output register 70, respectively. The appendix which forms a part of this description is a source code for a specific weld operation which is appropriately down loaded from computer 26 into motion controller 28 after the various weld and material parameters for the operation have been generated by the host computer. Upon commencement or start 82 of the weld cycle, computer 26 performs a series of pre-weld calculations 93 which are reflected by the output numbers in register 70. The values for each of the output variables depend on a number of variables programmed into input register 38. The input variables include the type of material 73 to be welded, the weight 75 of the rotating workpiece, and the geometric or size properties 77 of the workpieces to be welded together. Input register 38 also includes the desired final angular orientation between the workpieces

relative to their common axis (the desired final position 42 of rotatable workpiece 18 relative to non-rotatable workpiece 22), the lengths 76, 78 of the first and second workpieces, respectively, and the desired length 80 for the finished product. Computer 26 obtains values for a material constant (mC) 6 and a geometry constant (gC) 8 from a pre-programmed Lookup Table as is common industry practice. Based on the values programmed into input register 38 for variables 73, 75 and 77, as well as the values obtained for constants 6, 8, the computer 26 then calculates and outputs the rotational moment of inertia 72 (see FIG. 7). Computer 26 also calculates and outputs the target upset distance 74, which is a linear measurement of the amount of material lost during the weld process, by adding the length 76 of workpiece 18 and the length 78 of workpiece 22, and subtracting the desired length 80 of the final welded product. The values for lengths 76, 78 and 80 are input into the computer 26 by the operator via input register 38. Computer 26 also outputs the required pre-heat force level 79, the required heat force level 81, and the required forge force level 83, which tells actuator 25 how hard to press the first workpiece and the second workpiece together during different phases of the weld cycle, all of which are calculated using conventional engineering principles. Computer 26 also calculates the required pre-heat time 61 (T_1 to T_a), which is the length of time required to complete the pre-heat process, and also calculates the pre-heat distance 63, which represents the distance traveled by the second workpiece 22 as it travels towards the first workpiece 18 along slide or track 24. Similarly, computer 26 calculates the required heat time 65 (T_a to T_2) and heat distance 67, the required forge time 69 (T_2 to T_3) and required forge distance 71, all of which is calculated using conventional engineering principles based on the material variables input by the operator. The sum of the pre-heat distance 63, the heat distance 67 and the forge distance 71 equals the total upset distance 74. Finally, based on the desired rotational speed 53 of the spindle during the weld phase, the computer calculates the number of pre-heat rotations 48 required in order to pre-heat the material at the required pre-heat force level 79, the number of heating rotations 49 required to heat the material at the interface to a plastic state at the calculated heat force level 81, as well as the number of forge rotations 50 required for the spindle to stop at the desired angular position 42 at the calculated forge force level 83.

When the operator initiates the start command 82, the computer 26 performs the pre-weld calculations 93 and creates the output register 70, which contains values for each of the variables 39, 44, 46, 48, 49, 50, 53, 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 72, 74, 79, 81 and 83 as shown in FIG. 7. Computer 26 generates the spindle profile curve 120 shown in FIG. 5, and also sets the start position of slide 24 so that the total travel of slide 24 will match the desired upset distance 74. Before the spindle rotation begins, a subroutine 89 causes motion controller 28 to orient the spindle 14 (the actual spindle position 37) at a setpoint or "home" mark 87. Next, a status subroutine 89A communicates the presence of any spindle positional errors to the host computer 26 before motion controller 28 begins spindle rotation and initiates a correction of such errors through motion controller 28. Upon completion of subroutine 89 with an indication of no errors, subroutine 89A communicates a go command to motion controller 28, which in turn communicates a speed signal 54 to drive motor 32 commencing the rotation of spindle 14.

As shown in FIG. 5, the first phase of the weld cycle is the acceleration phase 90, during which the spindle is accelerated to a desired rotational speed 53. During acceleration

phase 90, subroutine 92 (see FIG. 3) via control loop 40 constantly compares the actual spindle acceleration rotations 46A, in increments of 1/1000th of a revolution, to the desired spindle acceleration rotations 46 as dictated by the spindle profile 120 for that particular moment during the acceleration phase 90. Motion controller 28 makes the necessary speed adjustments via speed signal 54 as required, and the comparison by subroutine 92 continues until the acceleration phase 90 is complete. Subroutine 92 typically triggers the completion of the acceleration phase by monitoring the total spindle rotations for that phase, but may also be programmed to trigger the end of the first phase 90 based on elapsed time. Next, status subroutine 92A commences which communicates the presence of any positional errors to the host computer 26 before commencement of the next stage. If any positional errors have been detected, such as the incorrect number of rotations during the acceleration phase or the improper angular position of the spindle 14 at the end of the phase, subroutine 92A communicates the error(s) to computer 26, which can immediately recalculate the remaining portions of spindle profile 120 for the subsequent phases in order to obtain the correct final angular position.

Upon completion of subroutine 92A, a signal is sent to computer 26 which indicates that the second phase 96 is about to commence. Phase 96, which commences at a time indicated by time T1 in FIG. 5, includes both a pre-heat phase 96A and a heating phase 96B. Phase 96B terminates when the material at interface 19 has reached a plastic state, which should coincide with the completion of the desired pre-heat rotations 48 and the desired heating rotations 49, and which signals the end of phase 96. At the beginning of phase 96, spindle 14 is rotating at the desired rotation or weld speed 53, and motion controller 28 via control loop 40 maintains the rotation of spindle 14 at this desired speed. During the pre-heat stage 96A, computer 26 sends a force command 85 to actuator 25, which brings the workpiece 22 into contact with workpiece 18 at the pre-heat pressure force level 79, followed by stage 96B which through actuator 25 causes workpiece 22 to be continuously forced against workpiece 18 at a specific heat pressure force level 81. The friction between workpiece 18 and workpiece 22 immediately begins to heat the interface 19 between the workpieces at the commencement of stage 96A, and the heating continues through stage 96B. During phase 96, subroutine 98 via control loop 40 constantly compares the actual pre-heat rotations 48A, in increments of 1/1000th of a revolution, to the desired pre-heat rotations 48, plus the desired number heating rotations 49 to the actual heating rotations 49A as dictated by the spindle profile 120 for that particular moment during phase 96. Meanwhile, motion controller 28 makes any necessary speed adjustments via speed signal 54. When subroutine 98 detects that the total heating rotations 49 have been completed with the material at the workpiece interface 19 reaching a plastic state, subroutine 98 indicates the completion of phase 96 by sending a signal to computer 26. Next, status subroutine 98A commences the presence of any errors in the position of spindle 14 to the host computer 26. Upon completion of subroutine 98A with an indication of no errors, subroutine 98A communicates a command to computer 26 to commence the next phase.

Phase 96 is followed by a forge phase 100 which commences at time T2, and which terminates when the desired forge rotations 50 have been completed and the spindle rotation has stopped, which occurs at time T3. During forge phase 100, spindle 14 decelerates in accordance with profile curve 120. Forge phase 100 is in turn followed by a dwell phase 102 in which the two workpieces are maintained

under pressure as the material at workpiece interface 19 cools, with phase 102 terminating at time T4. At the initiation of the forge phase 100, motion controller 28 begins decelerating the spindle 14, and subroutine 101 via control loop 40 constantly compares the desired forge rotations 50, in increments of 1/1000th of a revolution, to the actual forge rotations 51 as dictated by the spindle profile 120 for that particular moment during phase 100, and motion controller 28 makes the necessary speed adjustments via speed signal 54. The comparison by subroutine 101 continues until the forge phase 100 is complete at time T3, at which point the spindle 14 has stopped at the desired final position 42. Also during the forge phase 100, as the spindle 14 begins to slow down, computer 26 sends a signal to actuator 25, which causes an increase in pressure between first workpiece 18 and second workpiece 22 up to the forge force level 83.

When spindle 14 stops, computer 26 measures the actual travel of actuator 25 and compares the actual upset length 104 to the desired upset length 74 and determines if the actual upset 104 is within bounds. Subroutine 110 monitors the time under forge pressure, and sends a signal to computer 26 when the dwell time is complete, which occurs at time T4. At time T4, the forge pressure is released and the weld cycle is complete. Finally, motion controller 28 reports any final positional errors to computer 26, which can be communicated to the operator.

The invention is not to be limited to the following claims but it may be modified within the scope of the claims.